

**Couples Therapy with Torture Survivors**

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Center for Victims of Torture

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**After War, Love Can Be a Battlefield**



- *These days the Army is fighting a problem as complex and unpredictable as any war: disintegrating marriages. (NY times, April 6, 2008)*

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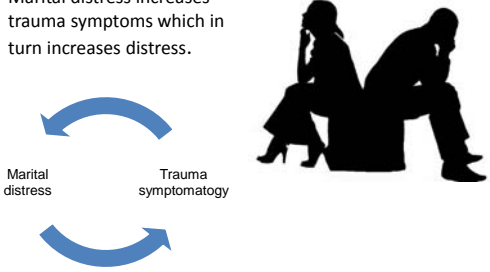
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**Marital distress**

- Marital distress increases trauma symptoms which in turn increases distress.



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graph TD; MD[Marital distress] --> TS[Trauma symptomatology]; TS --> MD;
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### Objectives for today

<p style="color: red; font-weight: bold;">Increase awareness of the systemic/dyadic effects of torture and trauma.</p>	<p style="color: orange; font-weight: bold;">Increase appreciation for the rationale and benefits of intervening at the couples level in trauma treatment.</p>
<p style="color: orange; font-weight: bold;">Be able to reflect on and consider challenging issues of: Conjoint work, Family secrets, and contextual factors like immigration as pertains to working with trauma couples.</p>	<p style="color: green; font-weight: bold;">Become familiar with select theoretical and couples therapy approaches that fit.</p> <p style="color: green; font-weight: bold;">See some practical examples of CVT couples work</p>

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### CVT Minnesota Healing Center

- Our clinical experience at CVT confirms the fact that **couples are dramatically affected** but at the same time are **very instrumental** in the survivors' recovery.




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### Torture and the human connection

- There is greater recognition of the **"violation of human connection"** that occurs when trauma happens especially if of human design (Herman, 1992)
- Trauma **disrupts attachment bonds** and severs important internal and external family connections (Suzan Johnson, 2002)
- Torture occurs within a socio-political, historical, and cultural context. It **aims to break connections** between individuals and, ultimately, to break social bonds at all levels of society. CVT
- "It is the ability to **derive comfort from another human being** that ultimately determines the aftermath of trauma, not the history of the trauma itself". (van der Kolk, Perry and Herman, 1991)

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Torture affects 5 basic human needs, with direct relational consequences:

- ◆ The need to feel **safe**
- ◆ The need to feel **some control** over our lives
- ◆ The need to **trust**
- ◆ The need to feel **close/connected to others**
- ◆ The need to feel of **value** (self worth)

◆ Whether trauma and the resultant PTSD affects a single member or the whole family, the entire family endures the traumatic aftermath and a deterioration of interpersonal functioning.

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### Effects of Trauma on the Family

Figley(1988) delineates four separate ways in which families can be affected by trauma

1. **Simultaneous effects** – catastrophe directly strikes the entire family
2. **Vicarious effects** – when the traumatic event strikes one family member and the response of the other family members results in the experience of trauma.
3. **Chiasmal effects** – when the traumatic stress appears to “infect” other family members after making contact with primary victim.
4. **Intrafamilial trauma** – when the trauma comes from within the family

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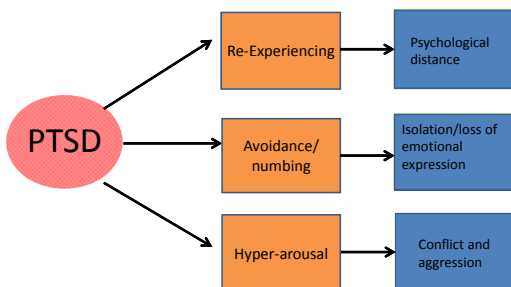
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PTSD is devastating to relationships.



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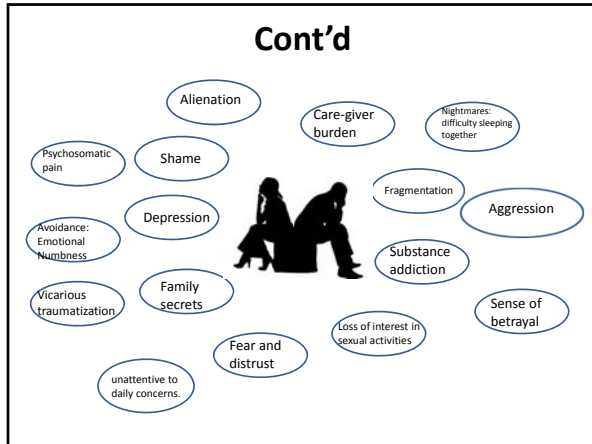
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- Cont'd**
- Those with PTSD 2X as likely to divorce; 3X more likely to divorce two or more times
    - 4X greater likelihood of marital distress
    - 2<sup>nd</sup> highest diagnosis associated with marital distress
  - Increased incidence of intimate partner violence, with rates as high as 63% over a one-year period.
  - Poorer communication
  - Report high levels of distress and demoralization.
  - Increased incidence of sexual dysfunction
  - Partners with PTSD
    - May be less self-disclosing and less expressive
    - Have more anxiety related to intimacy.
- Department of Health and Human Services

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- Top 5 Referral Issues – U.S. Army**
- Couple's Issues 51.9%
  - Depression 18.1%
  - Counseling 11.9%
  - Family Relations 9.2%
  - Stress Management 9.0%
- Family Interventions in the Treatment of PTSD in OEF/OIF Veterans, Frederic Sautter, Ph.D.

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### Snapshots of CVT work

- At centers in Pweto and Moba, In DRC, we piloted couples therapy groups for rape survivors and their husbands.
- The results were extraordinary. Many men explained how they blamed their wives for the soldiers' actions because it was easier to be angry at them rather than a soldier over whom they were powerless. Couples reported newfound understanding, compassion for one another and closeness.




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### Snapshots of CVT work

- In northern Uganda, we have worked in the villages with husbands and their wives who were raped and feel rejected by their husbands and marital communities, but culturally have no return ticket to their birth communities.




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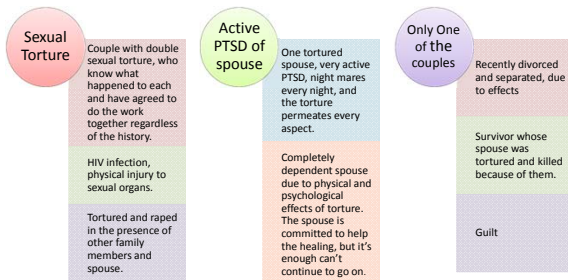
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### At CVT Minneapolis, snapshots:




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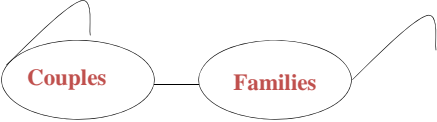
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### Benefits of providing couple therapy, and/or looking through the lenses of...



Help survivor couples deal more effectively with trauma-related marital distress.      Increase spousal support.

Assist partners to understand and empathize with confusing behavior.

Promote treatment engagement.      Strengthen intimate relationships.

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### Some specific considerations for working with the trauma couples

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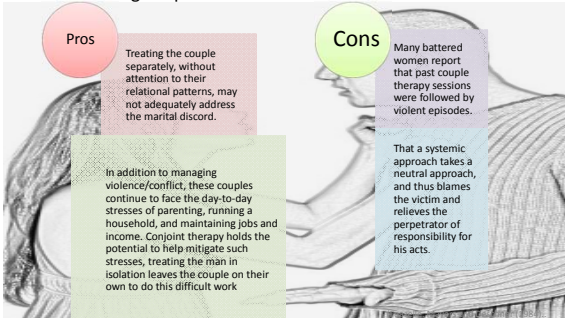
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### Conjoint Therapy or not:

The position that hold both partners accountable and examining couple interaction.



**Pros**  
Treating the couple separately, without attention to their relational patterns, may not adequately address the marital discord.

**Cons**  
Many battered women report that past couple therapy sessions were followed by violent episodes.

In addition to managing violence/conflict, these couples continue to face the day-to-day stresses of parenting, running a household, and maintaining jobs and income. Conjoint therapy holds the potential to help mitigate such stresses, treating the man in isolation leaves the couple on their own to do this difficult work.

That a systemic approach takes a neutral approach, and thus blames the victim and relieves the perpetrator of responsibility for his acts.

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**Borrowing from Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence literature**

Intimate partner violence literature, though not trauma specific is helpful to borrow from, especially components that include the psychological aspects of the violence, and the these interplay systemically.

*Domains of Abuse*

Mary Fabri, PsyD. Increasing Awareness and Responding to Domestic Violence in the Care of Torture Survivors and their Families. May 2014. Webinar Presentation.

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**Cycle of violence**

War at Home – a Review of the Relationship between War Trauma and Family Violence  
Claudia Catani (2010)

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**Ambiguous Loss**

- Due to the ambiguity surrounding the loss, physical or psychological resulting from trauma, individuals, couples, and families remain confused. Without comprehension, they can't make sense of their situation to cope. Without meaning, they can't find hope to help them move forward with their lives.
- They are stuck, consequently cut offs, couple's conflict, family separations result.

Pauline Boss originated the term, Ambiguous Loss, and is the principal theorist. See website [www.ambiguousloss.com](http://www.ambiguousloss.com)

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### Family/Marital Secrets – collusion, selective disclosure, or complete disclosure?

- The intentional concealment of information by one or more family members who are impacted by it.
- Family secrets have consequences beyond what the secret keepers ever imagined
- Is collusion supporting avoidance and thus curtailing healing? Is it ethical?
- How do we respond when clients who were raped and feel like they have to conceal to keep the relationship going asks us to do so?
- Does disclosure jeopardize the fragile relationships?



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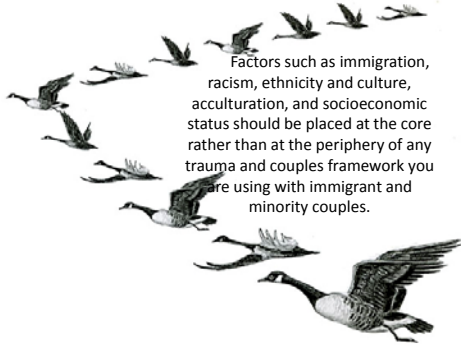
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### Immigration, Ethnicity, socioeconomic contributes to marital distress.



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### Immigrant couples

- Caution in not viewing the marital structures as problematic just because they don't fit the traditional middle class.
- Any couples work with them should have the capacity to take into account the transnational complexities, resettlement and racial complexities, family dynamic complexities and changing cultural views of marriage.



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### African immigrant example

- Trauma narratives of preflight, refugee camps, and resettlement.
- Failed attempts at marital reconstruction- The very effort at reconstruction of the relationships often fueled their destruction
- Stresses of family separations and Reunifications.
- Stresses of gender role changes
- Paradox/ambiguity of gain and loss

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### SOME SPECIFIC COUPLES THERAPY APPROACHES THAT I HAVE FOUND USEFUL

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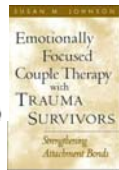
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### Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy with Trauma Survivors

- Based on attachment theory.
  - Primary need is "felt security" with other
    - A safe haven - to go to
    - A secure base - to go out from
  - "ARE you there for me?"
    - Are you Accessible - Do I matter ?
    - Are you Responsive to my need - Can I depend ?
    - Are you Engaged with me ?
  - Emotional presence is "solution"

Couples therapy that helps partners reprocess their affective responses to one another and change their patterns of interaction to create trust and foster secure attachment.




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### Stages in EFT

The process of change in EFT has been delineated in nine treatment steps: -

- Cycle De-escalation
  - Step 1. Assessment-creating an alliance and explicating the core issues in the couple's conflict using an attachment perspective.
  - Step 2. Identifying the problem interactional cycle that maintains attachment insecurity and relationship distress.
  - Step 3. Accessing the unacknowledged emotions underlying interactional positions.
  - Step 4. Reframing the problem in terms of the cycle, the underlying emotions, and attachment needs.

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### Stages in EFT Cont'd

- Changing Interactional Positions.
  - Step 5. Promoting identification with disowned needs and aspects of self and integrating these into relationship interactions.
  - Step 6. Promoting acceptance of the partner's new construction of experience in the relationship and new responses.
  - Step 7. Facilitating the expression of specific needs and wants and creating emotional engagement.
- Consolidation/ Integration.
  - Step 8. Facilitating the emergence of new solutions to old problematic relationship issues.
  - Step 9. Consolidating new positions and new cycles of attachment behavior.

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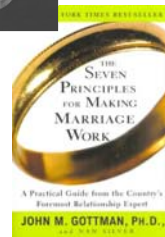
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### Empirically derived couple Therapy: Gottman



- Relies on scientific research on the success or failure of marriages to deliver intense therapy to couples in need.
- Relationship difficulties caused by the **Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse**:
  - Criticism
  - Defensiveness
  - Stonewalling
  - Contempt

Couples who function effectively treat each other with consideration, and are supportive of each other, and the goals of therapy include increasing closeness and friendship behaviors, addressing conflict productively, and building a life of shared meaning together. The seven principles.




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**Gottman: Seven Principles**

The Gottman approach involves customizing The Seven Principles from the research to each couple's particular patterns and challenges.



The Gottman Institute -www.gottman.com

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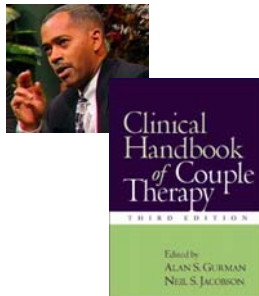
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**Couples therapy using Multicultural Perspective. Kenneth Hardy**

- The notions that all couple therapy is “cross-cultural” therapy- All human relationships are characterized by sameness and difference.
- Healthy couples can openly discuss their similarities and differences, and power is evenly distributed;




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**Multicultural Perspective**

- How do partners make meaning in their lives?
- Where are incongruencies between couple's stated beliefs and actual practices?
- How does the couple negotiate differences?
- What are the culturally based Pride-shame issues? How are they negotiated?
- What are cultural legacies and loyalties that each partner brings to the relationship?
- What are the “invisible wounds of oppression”? How do they inform couple dynamics?

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### What are the invisible wounds of oppression/violated human rights?

- Silence/learned voicelessness
- Psychological homelessness
- Rage
- Self-hate/internalized oppression
- Orientation toward survival

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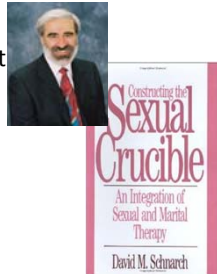
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### Sex Therapy

- As an occasion to recognize and learn about the influence of the trauma/torture on their sexual relationship.
- If done from a systemic point of view, the issues of power and control and gridlock can be addressed within this work as well.



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### Narrative and Solution Focused couples approaches

- In Narrative couples therapy, neglected aspects of the couples stories that have been given less power and visibility are sought, and the affirmative stories that are hidden beneath problems such as blame, conflict, and disconnection are excavated.
- In SFCT the therapist helps the couple identify elements of the desired solution which are usually already present. Rather than searching for causes of the problem, the focus is on the future, defining the marital changes and making them a reality.

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